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History is history only insofar as it has not attained either absolute discourse or absolute singularity, insofar as its meaning remains confused, mixed ... History is truly the realm of the inexact (Paul Ricoeur 1992:105).

Oracle (Remastered) 1

In transition: Remastering a vocabulary of ambiguity and polysemy

Since the release of her first videos *Alien* (1998) and *Oracle* (1999), Minnette Vári has been articulating in her *oeuvre*, mainly through digital media, issues related to history and memory, both personal and collective. Weaving fragments of South Africa's history – drawn from the media and from official sources – with her performed personal recollections, Vári introduces history as representation, and as unfinished narrative with first-person interventions.

Making use of her digitally manipulated performances, the artist embeds a new set of narratives into her work, thus positioning herself as the narrator-character, one who relates the facts, experiences them, and ultimately bears their weight and consequences. Through this autobiographical representation, Vári dismantles time as a linear and chronological concept. According to the artist, 'chronology is not a good way to think about time,' since 'the mapping of time is an awkward and difficult process; history has to be pieced together.'¹ It is exactly by reassembling the puzzle of history that the artist creates a new concept of time within

her own narrative: time in Vári's *oeuvre* is perceived as collage; it is stitched together during the actual creative process, which combines moments of the historical narrative with cut-outs from fables and mythical stories.

Although the moving image is predominant in Vári's work, the artist, who was trained in traditional methods of painting, sculpture and printmaking, considers working in video to be the same as painting. 'I never chose video ... I chose painting' she states in an interview with Thorolf Lipp & Tobias Wendl.² For Vári, painting is the ideal medium for the process of layering and the serialisation of images, which are recurring characteristics of her practice. In addition to the natural flow that exists between painting and video, the transition from painting to new media was an organic process for the artist due to her exposure to digital technology from an early age; drawing is another medium that often precedes her working in video; and both are part of creative cycles that often culminate in video works.

Thus, though little explored within the

¹ Interview in the exhibition catalogue *Towards-transit: New visual language in South Africa*.

² Lipp, T & Wendl, T. 2010. *Helping things to reappear. Conversations with Minnette Vári*. Documentary film. [O] Excerpt available: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWHJCDeUq7U>.

*Self Portrait (Lark)**Self Portrait (Raven)**Self Portrait (Starling)**Self Portrait (Sparrow)*

artist's body of work, Vári's drawing production becomes a complement to her video practice and is thematically connected to it. Considering how both practices have been developing in a parallel manner, finding out about possible dialogues, points of proximity and divergences between the two can shed new light on understanding the artist's work as a whole.

Minnette Vári on paper

During 2006 and 2007, bordering on the same period in which she created *Quake* (2007), *Vigil* (2007), *Fulcrum* (2007–8) and *Rebus* (2008), Vári also created the series titled *Self-Portrait Ink Series*. The series is comprised of fourteen ink drawings on paper. Each self-portrait is a different depiction of the artist's face and a part of her shoulders. All show a bird on her head – at times in an upright position, at times nestling, and at times standing as if about to take flight. Vári invites the ink to

spread across the paper in a gesture that edges between control and chance. The resulting images of her face, as well as the bird (the witness to the mutation who also endures its effects) will undergo a progressive disfiguration, from the well-defined image, *Self Portrait (Lark)*, to a blurrier one, *Self Portrait (Starling)* and, finally, to one that borders on the unrecognisable, *Self Portrait (Sparrow)*. Thus, the nuanced set of drawings is presented to us in a process of metamorphosis, as mutating forms before our eyes, though not in a linear manner. These distortions bring to mind the equally distorted images of *Alien*.

In some of her works such as *Self Portrait (Lark)*, *Self Portrait (Robin)* and *Self Portrait (Coua)*, Vári introduces colours in a more or less pronounced way, thus reinforcing the tensions between defined/blurry, recognisable/imprecise that infuse her portraits. The drawings are 76 x 56 centimetres, a size that lends a real-life presence to these works. Seen in their totality, the series – part of the artist's ongoing practice of creating self-portraits – stands

as an animated projection; as a set of images in motion. This impression stems largely from the artist's defacing image combined with the seriality of the collection of drawings: the repeated depiction of her self-portrait in distinct moments of its transformation. Thus, even though she is using a motionless medium, Vári succeeds in translating into drawing the idea of movement intrinsic to her predominant practice.

In conjunction with her videos *Parallax* (2010) and *Totem* (2010), Vári produced the following series on paper: *The Discovery of Writing*, *The Apotrope Series (Life of Baubo)* – this one departing from the *Apotrope Study Series*; *Baubo on the Shore (The Unforgetting of Being and The Unforgetting of Knowing)*, and *The Wisdom of the Impious (Spun, Flown and Strewn)*. *The Discovery of Writing* features two ink drawings, subtitled *Weft* and *Skein*. *Weft* depicts a nude female figure half kneeling on the base of an old spinning wheel. The image denotes the idea of intense movement depicted through the figure's facial expression, her wild hair, and



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The Discovery of Writing (Weft)

the spinning wheel. This idea is reinforced by the
presence of flying birds in the upper left corner of
the drawing. *Skein* depicts the female figure again,
now in an almost crouching position, seemingly
absorbed in a different activity, barely touching the
spinning wheel.

In these series of widely expanded scale,
with works measuring 150 x 190 cm, Vári explicitly
presents a concept that pervades her *oeuvre* as a



The Discovery of Writing (Skein)

whole: that of the female as being the one who
weaves the narrative thread, the one who operates,
controls, and even reconstructs its wheels, as it is
the case in the videos *Alien* (1998) and *Oracle* (1999),
as well as *Long Walk Home* (1999), *REM* (2001), and
Aurora Australis (2001).

The Apotrope Series (Life of Baubo) and *Baubo*
on the Shore (The Unforgetting of Being and The
Unforgetting of Knowing) are series composed

respectively of seven and two drawings of female
figures. These series explore depictions of pre-
pagan goddesses, with special attention given
to Baubo, whose body is formed of a head, legs
and an exposed vulva. In Greek mythology, Baubo
is the crone who rescues the goddess Demeter
from her state of grief and depression after losing
her daughter Persephone to Hades. Baubo wins
Demeter's attention and gets her to smile with



Baubo on the Shore (The Unforgetting of Being)

jesting comments and, in a more radical gesture, by lifting up her skirt to amuse Demeter. The images of Baubo in *The Apotrope Series* reflect the different states personified by the goddess: screaming, guffawing, or with a slight smile on her face.

Vári explores the feminine through the weaver, the figure who interprets and recreates history – this concept itself is in dialogue with the autobiographic aspects of Vári's work, a female who inscribes herself physically in her work, who positions her body within the narrative as 'memory in flesh and blood'. In addition to that, Vári also considers the ways 'women have been cast in



Baubo on the Shore (The Unforgetting of Knowing)

societies through the ages: as agents of wisdom, innocence, corruption, vacuity, 'hysteria,' threat; as the spinster, the gossip, the whore, succubus, waif, siren, muse, maiden, mother, crone ...'³

In *The Wisdom of the Impious*, scale takes on enormous proportions, with drawings measuring 270 x 190 centimetres. The series is comprised of three anamorphic drawings identified by the subtitles *Spun*, *Flown* and *Strewn*, and makes direct reference to Francisco Goya's *Los Caprichos* prints. The drawings are perceived differently according

to the viewer's position: looking from a frontal point, the lines take the form of dark landscapes; when seen from a lateral position, the drawings reveal themselves as sinister, distorted bodies. This twofold reading generated by intentionally distorting the images' perspective shows an overlapping of times, a collage of two different moments in a single picture plane. While Goya's prints served as a reproach addressed to the society during his lifetime, *The Wisdom of the Impious* alludes, in a mirroring fashion, to the conflicts contemporary to Vári.

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³ Interview with the author on September 1, 2015.



Baubo on the Shore (The Unforgetting of Knowing)

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The presence of birds is a recurring theme in

the artist's *oeuvre*. They appear in works on paper like *The Wisdom of the Impious*, *The Discovery of Writing* and *Self-Portrait Ink Series*, as well as video works, such as *Totem* (2010). In all of these pieces, Vári explores cultural, mythological, spiritual and symbolic meanings associated with birds, including their role as messengers, carriers of good or bad luck, symbols of freedom, fidelity or peace.

The Remastered series

It is, however, through the series of drawings, *Alien (Remastered)* and *Oracle (Remastered)*, both conceived in 2011, that Vári introduces an important breakthrough in her work: the artist takes a reverse path in relation to her usual creative process, transitioning from digital to traditional media. For each of the series, Vári creates drawings departing from the original *Alien* and *Oracle* video stills – four drawings titled *Alien (Remastered) 1*, to *Alien (Remastered) 4*, and four drawings titled *Oracle (Remastered) 1* to *Oracle (Remastered) 4*. It is possible to identify two stages in the creation process: Vári first transforms the images in motion from the video into video still images. She then reenacts the still images as drawings. The works are as faithful a reproduction of the film stills as the process of ink drawing, itself hard to control, allows. Given the impossibility of complete control over the movement of the ink, the final drawings assume layers of distortion that supersede the distortions of the original images. Thus, in both series, the images embody a state of marked imprecision, one that borders on the edge of dissolution, as seen in *Oracle (Remastered) 2* and *Oracle (Remastered) 4*. Once more, despite the conflicting nature of both media, Vári successfully



Alien (Remastered) 1



Alien (Remastered) 4

*Oracle (Remastered) 2**Oracle (Remastered) 4*

translates into paper the density and movement of the video.

The concept of remastering in digital media refers to the act of producing a new master from a previously created piece in order to improve its quality. But what does it mean to 'remaster' when we transfer a work from a digital medium to an ancient one? Vári provides us with some clues when she explains that the master in this case comes from an alien source, and it is here reinterpreted. She adds that, 'sometimes technological "advancement" can in fact be set in motion the other way, e.g. starting from a "new media" position and working in retrograde process ...'.⁴ We can therefore understand the term remaster (or enhance) from the perspective of a deconstruction of the video: the artist freezes a work from its originally ongoing loop and focuses on specific frames. While choosing the reverse process, Vári raises some relevant questions: With the film stills, which frames of the video are captured by the artist? Does 'remaster' refer only to the formal aspect of the work, or might we say that the term can also be applied to its content – to the discussions introduced by the artist in the original video and brought to the surface through the drawings? Considering that what Vári chose to reproduce on paper are images of her performances, can we understand the term 'remaster' also as a reenactment of these performances through drawing? Engaging with these questions expands our references and grants us access to aspects of Vári's artistic practice that either went previously unnoticed, or took on a new meaning to the artist.

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⁴ Artist's statement for *Alien (Remastered)* and *Oracle (Remastered)*.

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Though in the videos the narrative itself is not linear, given the very nature of video as a

medium, its electronic flow allows us to observe images in a linear, consecutive manner – they are presented for a certain amount of time, one after another, until the loop starts again. In *Remastered*, however, Vári interrupts this sequence. In all eight drawings, the artist points to certain frames of her autobiographical insertion, capturing specific moments of her performance. In the frozen images, the focus is displaced from the narrative to singular moments in a series of actions or events. This displacement of focus accentuates the performative nature of her gestures, elevating it to the status of ritual.

Closing remarks

Though still less explored, Vári's drawing production reveals a rich dialogue with her work in video. This dialogue is present in the formal aspects of the work, since Vári blurs the borders between both productions. By transitioning from drawings to video, the artist cross-pollinates these media with elements that aren't intrinsic to them. One example is the way that Vári engages with the idea of movement – naturally present in the moving image – in drawing series such as *The Discovery of Writing*, *The Wisdom of the Impious* and even the *Self-Portrait Ink Series*. In this latter case, movement is brought about by the production of the self-portrait in a serial manner and by the gradual defacing of the artist's image in the different drawings. The dialogue is also manifested through the semantic aspects of the work, as it engages with and explores specific concepts of time and of notions of the feminine. Time appears in Vári's videos as a collage of moments in history, of personal memory, of myths and fables. In her

drawings, time is an overlapping of moments in one picture plane – an effect created by the process of intentionally distorting perspective, as in *The Wisdom of the Impious*. Time also appears in the drawings as being suspended, like in *Oracle (Remastered)* and *Alien (Remastered)*. The notion of the feminine and the complex insertion of the artist's mutating subjectivity in her works are made visible through fragments of her performances. It is also highlighted by her direct and indirect self-portraiture, since Vári leaves autobiographic traces in her work through the characters she chooses.

The *Remastered* series, in turn, represents a breakthrough, since Vári purposefully brings density to the transition between the two media by translating digital work into the realm of drawing. The resulting work, in both cases zoomed-in cut-outs of the artist's performative insertions in the videos, unfolds layers of distortion and imprecision that supersedes the images in the original videos. This distortion is accentuated to the brink of dissolution. By bringing the definition of remastering into question and adopting a reverse creative process, Vári also reframes the concept of technological advancement and opens up a new possibility of engaging with her digitalised performances. Transformed into drawings, the frozen images of *Remastered*, fruit of a suspended flow of video, elevate unique gestures in the artist's performances to the status of ritual. And so Vári goes beyond articulating history and memory, document and recollection, in a 'confused' and 'mixed' manner, to use Ricoeur's terminology. She freely transitions between painting, video and drawing, framing blurred lines, imprecisions and distortions as creative spaces; as a kingdom of ambiguity and polysemy.

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⁴ Artist's statement for *Alien (Remastered)* and *Oracle (Remastered)*.